



(Im)personal

Two Ways of Studying AI

Qarayev Nihat
Boikhovskaya Anastasia




















Simon Lindgren, 2024



Karen Hao, 2025

Translation

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This book is not a corporate book. While it tells the inside story of OpenAI, that story is meant to be a prism through which to see far beyond this one company.

300 interviews
around **260** people
more than **90** current or former OpenAI
executives and employees
40 current and former executives and employees
at Microsoft, Anthropic, Meta, Google,
DeepMind, and Scale, as well as people close
to Sam Altman



My research is about **politics, power, and resistance at the intersection of society and digital technologies.**

I use critical discourse approaches, computational text analysis, and social network analysis to study issues relating to movements, mobilization, opinions, and identities

1

**What is
AI?**

2

**Who
understands,
broadcasts,
and creates
AI?**

3

**What are the
industrial
consequences
of AI?**



What is AI?



An empty signifier

(Lindgren, 2024, p.13)

Lindgren

AI refers to a whole complex of developments: artificial intelligence, machine learning, neural networks, automation, algorithms, dataication...

Hao

Artificial intelligence is a technology that takes many forms. It is in fact a multitude of technologies that shape-shift and evolve.

Lindgren

Social shaping technology (Critical theory):

“...Being co-produced at **the intersection of the social and the technical**, instead of as a predominantly technological phenomenon.” (Roberge and Castelle, 2021b, p.4)

Assemblage:

“...we must include in its definition **not only technology** (its tools and machines), but also: **humans** the behaviours of whom form both the input and output of AI systems; and **material** and **symbolic artifacts** – patterns of community, organization, design, and architecture that are affected by AI systems”

Mythology:

“The **terms by which we understand AI are not definite or universally 'true'**. Instead, they are created in a given social and historical setting, among people, where different agendas, political convictions, economic interests, and power inequalities will be at play”.

Empires

“Over the years, I’ve found only one metaphor that encapsulates the nature of what these AI power players are: **empires**. During the long era of European colonialism, empires **seized and extracted resources that were not their own and exploited the labor of the people they subjugated to mine, cultivate, and refine those resources for the empires’ enrichment.** [...] The empires of AI are not engaged in the same overt violence and brutality that marked this history. But they, too, **seize and extract precious resources to feed their vision of artificial intelligence.**”

“**Extractivism** [...] is a mode of accumulation based on **hyper-extraction with lopsided benefits and costs**: concentrated mass-scale removal of resources primarily for export, with benefits largely accumulating far from the sites of extraction.” (Collard & Dempsey)



**Who understands,
broadcasts, and creates
AI?**

(Who does AI?)

Lindgren

Optimism, pessimism, fuck that; we're going to make it happen. As God is my bloody witness, I'm hell-bent on making it work. (Musk, cited in Hoffman, 2008)

Californian Ideology bears the promise that '[e]xisting social, political and legal power structures will wither away to be replaced by unfettered interactions between autonomous individuals and their software', but behind the veil of ideology is the 'blindness towards - and dependence on - the social and racial polarization of the society from which it was born' (Barbrook and Cameron, 1996, p. 14)

Lindgren

Barbrook and Cameron write that 'this optimistic vision of the future has been enthusiastically embraced by computer nerds, slacker students, innovative capitalists, social activists, trendy academics, futurist bureaucrats and opportunistic politicians' (Barbrook and Cameron, 1996, p. 1). The Californian Ideology has spread from the US to Europe and the rest of the world to put its mark on both the tech industry and on the ways in which we imagine technology

In essence, **the Californian Ideology is elitist and non-universal. It gives rise to** a new 'virtual class' of seemingly privileged digital workers (developers, academics, communicators, and so on), which at the same time is just as disposable as are workers under any previous capitalist system. (Case of Timnit Gebru.)

Hao

“Nothing about this form of AI coming to the fore or even existing at all was inevitable.”

“Absent other options for what AI could be, OpenAI commands our imagination. Its belief in scaling was once viewed as extreme. Now scaling is seen across the tech industry as doctrine.”

“What is AGI? What does AGI look like?” Amodei said. “Well, you know, we’re in the awkward position of, we don’t know what it looks like. We don’t know when it’s going to happen. So we look for things that aren’t AGI but that present at least some of the opportunities and difficulties of AGI. And the hope is if we can handle those things well, then we’re kind of, like, ready for the bigger leagues.”



**What are the
industrial
consequences of AI?**

Lindgren

“AI will be more likely to displace or disrupt jobs than to replace humans. This is because behind the technological facade of AI systems, human work is needed for the machinery to run.”

Platform labour, where human activities are datafied and taskified.

Platform work devoids the employer from responsibility –
“risks and costs of production are downloaded onto workers.”

“In platform labour, algorithmic management is a common method for automatically coordinating and organizing workers and clients at scale. Algorithmic management makes use of AI to execute functions such as hiring, firing, coordination, and performance monitoring.”

Lindgren

Kate Crawford and danah boyd (2012, p. 663) pointed out how datafication and the reliance on large-scale datasets could provide any results 'with the aura of truth, objectivity and accuracy'

AI should be seen as signalling a danger: that human activities and qualities come to be redefined and assessed in machine terms' (Knee, 1985, p. 123).

The very core of AI ideology is the computational or information-processing model of mind that is expressed in the linked metaphors, 'the brain is like a computer' and 'the computer is like a brain', which mechanize the brain and anthropomorphize the computer. (Berman, 1992, p. 110)

Hao

Oskarina Veronica Fuentes Anaya: “The **erratic**, unpredictable nature of when work came and went began to control Fuentes’s life, **she stopped leaving the house on weekdays**, allowing herself only thirty-minute outings on weekends, which she learned from experience was when tasks were less likely to show up. **She slept fitfully, worried about the tasks that would arrive in the middle of the night.**”

Mophat Okinyi: “As the project for OpenAI continued, Okinyi’s work **schedule grew unpredictable**. Sometimes he had evening shifts; sometimes he had to work on weekends. And the posts were getting longer. At times they could unspool to five or six paragraphs. **The details grew excruciatingly vivid** [...] Okinyi’s **mental situation continued to deteriorate. He suffered insomnia. He cycled between anxiety and depression.**

Winnie: She started working twenty to twenty-two hours a day, **sleeping the absolute bare minimum to continue functioning.**

Hao

“Behind promises of their technologies enhancing productivity, unlocking economic freedom, and creating new jobs that would ameliorate automation, the present-day reality has been the opposite. Companies pad their bottom lines, **while the most economically vulnerable lose out and more and more highly educated people become ventriloquists for chatbots.**”

“Data is the last frontier of colonization,” Mahelona told me: The empires of old seized land from Indigenous communities and then forced them to buy it back, with new restrictive terms and services, if they wanted to regain ownership. “AI is just a land grab all over again. Big Tech likes to **collect your data more or less for free—to build whatever they want to, whatever their endgame is—and then turn it around and sell it back to you as a service.**”

Conclusions

While both studies overlap in their descriptions of AI, Lindgren places AI in the context of existing theoretical concepts, while Hao attempts to illustrate the implications of the technology through personal stories.

AI is a human-bound technology